

# SIMON KENTON, A RINALDO OF THE FRONTIER

One of the rude, unlettered men who was one of the winners of the West and whose adventures equal anything in fiction.

FROM the mountains of Kentucky a Rip Van Winkle of the middle west traveled to Frankfort in 1824. His clothes were in rags. His hair, which had not been combed or cut in many years, hung far down his back. His silvery beard reached his waist. His gun was antiquated, his horse was bony and poor and his dog lean and hungry. He was such a queer old man and was so mild-mannered and poverty-stricken that some of the coarse wits of the capital played tricks on him. They pretended to be greatly honored by meeting him, and when he told them he wanted to see the governor because he knew the governor would give him plenty of land, they had a tavern keeper pose as governor and make all sorts of ridiculous promises to him. Then they urged the old man to talk. He talked of Indians and Indian fights, of hairbreadth escapes and thrilling adventures until they tired of listening to him and turned him off. But before they turned him off they had hidden his poor, bony horse and pretended it had been lost.

## THREE TIMES AT THE STAKE.

No wonder the tales the old man told taxed the credulity of those brutal creatures who amused themselves at the expense of the poor. Eight times within the same month he was forced by Indians to run the gantlet. He fought in the Lord Dunmore war, the Revolutionary war and the war of 1812. In all of these his antagonists being Indians. He saved the life of Boone in one of the attacks on Boonesboro, and he was with Clark in that campaign that made Clark famous—the capture of Vincennes. Throughout Kentucky the story of his exploits had been told and retold until it had come to be a tradition. No wonder the rude jokers thought the old man was romancing, for until he came down from the mountains and visited Frankfort it was believed Kenton was dead, the report having gone out soon after the War of 1812 that he had been killed. The governor, the legislature and prominent citizens vied with each other in doing honor to the old man. Like Boone, he had little business sense. All the lands he had located for himself in the early days he had lost, because, like Boone, he had neglected to attend to some technicalities. The little tract in the mountains to which he had gone in his old age and poverty had been taken from him, too, for he had failed to register his claim to it, and some Kentucky nobly by the old frontiersman. Not only were some of his lands restored to him, but his condition and his services were brought to the attention of Congress. A pension was granted to him at once. Never again was the old pathfinder permitted to wander. And never again did the coarse wits of Frankfort for-

get Simon Kenton. When it became known how they had treated the old man the town became rather warm for them.

Boone as a leader, Kenton was not, but to some Kentuckians Kenton, on account of his surprising experiences, was the greater character. Possibly it was because he had picked up Kenton instead of Boone, to land in a poem the world would have known more of Kenton today. But Boone did not blunder much, for by no measure, except that of adventure, can Kenton be compared with the great Daniel.

A love affair drove Kenton to the frontier. He was born in Fauquier county, Virginia, in 1755. When he was 16 he fought with a lad named Lettichmann, who was his rival for the smiles of a girl. Kenton thought he had killed Lettichmann and fled for the Alleghenies. He changed his name to Butler, and for several years was a wanderer in what then was the wilderness of Kentucky, fearful of returning to civilization. There were other fugitives from justice in the borderland, too. They were desperados mostly. Kenton was not of their kind. He was a great, tall, loose-jointed man, fair-haired and wild-eyed. He was one of the most powerful of men and was unusually fleet of foot. One day he was a furious fighter once he started. As a marksman he had few superiors, and he became one of the most skilled of men in woodcraft.

For years he wandered over Kentucky hunting and searching for an El Dorado he had heard about. At times he traveled alone. At other times he had companions. Frequently he had encounters with Indians. Once when he had saved Boone's life by killing an Indian who was about to tomahawk the great hunter that Kenton entered upon the experiences that made him one of the great figures of his time.

With two companions named Clark and Montgomery he had been sent as a scout to make observations near an Indian town on the Little Miami, in Ohio, against which Col. Bowman planned to lead an expedition from Boonesboro. The three scouts, not content with getting all the information necessary for Bowman's purpose, were tempted to an exploit that brought disaster. In the Indian village was a corral and in the corral were 160 horses. The scouts determined to steal the 160 horses and flee with them to Kentucky. They were getting the horses out when the Indian village awoke. Then, instead of seeking safety in flight, Kenton and his companions, stuck to the horses until all were in motion. The night was dark and the three white men hid great difficulty in keeping the herd together. Once they got caught in a swamp and had a hard time extricating themselves. All night and the next day and all the next night they rode. The following day they reached the Ohio.

## CAPTURED.

Once across the river they would be safe, but it was storming furiously. They tried to cross, but the horses turned back. Again and again they tried to force the horses to swim, but it was no use. Then Kenton and his companions did the most foolish thing imaginable. Instead of moving either up or down the river, and keeping that much ahead of pursuers, they remained at the same place, and made no move until the Indians, who were trailing them, arrived. Then they tried to escape. Clark succeeded, but Montgomery was killed and scalped, and Kenton was overpowered and made prisoner. The Indians, after binding Kenton's arms and legs, mounted him on an unbroke colt and started back through the woods. Where the woods were particularly thick the Indians would lash the pony so that Kenton got the roughest of riding and missed few overhanging boughs or brambles.

Each day during the journey this was repeated. On the third day the party reached Chillicothe. Here Kenton was stripped and tied to the stake ready for burning.

The whole Indian band, braves, squaws and children, gathered and danced about him until midnight, the dance being spiced by occasional whippings of the captive with switches. For some reason the burning was postponed that night. Probably the Indians wished to prolong the pleasure of torturing him. He was released for a short time the next morning and saw the scalp of Montgomery dangling from in front of one of the wigwags. Later in the day he was made to run the gantlet. He was so fleet of foot that he surprised the Indians, and by dodging and making a detour he managed to reach the council chamber—the place of safety—having received only a few blows.

Then a council was held to determine whether he should be burned that day or carried to other villages and exhibited to other tribes. The warriors sat in silence while the war club was passed around the circle. To strike the earth with the club meant immediate death. To pass the club along meant to postpone the burning. A majority voted to carry the prisoner to other villages and then burn him.

## GIRTY'S PLEA.

Kenton, sure that nothing that could happen to him would be worse than the Indians planned, determined on escape. As the party was en route to the next village and while he was temporarily unbound and made a dash into the thicket. He was making good headway and had every hope of success when he suddenly was confronted by another band of mounted Indians. They were from the village to which Kenton was being taken, and he, in his flight, had plunged straight along the course his captors were taking.

Once more Kenton was bound and now a more careful watch was kept on him. Each day he had to run the gantlet. In one of the runnings he was hurt severely. Immediately after this he was taken to the council chamber and the braves had just voted for Kenton's immediate death when three renegade whites and an Indian arrived. They were white men, and they had a white woman and seven white children as prisoners. One of the white renegades was Simon Girty. He was the most bloodthirsty wretch in all the Indian country and had murdered many white men since casting his lot with the red men. He began to interrogate Kenton, who after a few minutes whispered that his name was Simon Butler. Instantly Girty's manner changed. Throwing his arms around Kenton he embraced him fervently. The Indians saw this with astonishment, but they were more astonished still when Girty turned to them and in a short, eloquent

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speech informed them the prisoner was his bosom friend, that they had traveled the same warpath, slept in the same blanket and dwelt in the same wigwag. He entreated them to spare him the agony of witnessing the torture of this old friend and then he begged for Kenton's life. Never had he asked such a favor of the Indians before. Never would he ask another. But this one life he must save and he surely was entitled to it by reason of his three years' service in the Indians' cause.

The braves listened to the speech in silence. Then some grunted their approval. Others objected. They said they felt like squaws, changing their minds every hour. Kenton was a notorious offender, had killed many Indians, stolen many horses, done many wicked things. Many red men had come a long distance to see the burning. It would be a shame to disappoint them.

Girty answered the spokesman. Briefly he recounted his own services. When had he ever interceded for a white before? Had he not brought seven scalps home from the last expedition? Had he not brought eight prisoners in for disposition, too? Had he asked that a single one of them should be saved? Now that he was asking the Indians for the first time the passage of the war club, which had been shattered by his self-disgrace and unworthy of confidence if it was refused. Whose tomahawk was blunder than his?

Never did man plead more earnestly for the life of another than did this fool murderer. For the life of Kenton. But for a time his eloquence was not enough. Speaker followed speaker, and for an hour and a half the debate was carried on. Then a vote was taken. Kenton watched the passage of the war club with more emotion than before. With rapture he saw that those who struck the floor were outvoted.

AGAIN CONDEMNED.

Girty, having been sustained, lost no time in doing all in his power for Kenton. He took him to his own wigwag, clothed and fed him and dressed his wounds. All his savagery was gone. He could not do enough for Kenton. But for a time his eloquence was not enough. Speaker followed speaker, and for an hour and a half the debate was carried on. Then a vote was taken. Kenton watched the passage of the war club with more emotion than before. With rapture he saw that those who struck the floor were outvoted.

Girty made another impassioned appeal, and a vote was taken. As the last chief voted Girty turned to Kenton. "Well, my friend, you must die!" he exclaimed.

Instantly the chiefs from a distance seized and pinioned Kenton. A rope was put about his neck and he was driven along. Apparently he was their prisoner for them to dispose of as they pleased. As they approached one Indian village an Indian rushed upon Kenton with an ax and struck him through the shoulder, breaking the bone and almost severing the arm. He would have repeated the blow had not Kenton's guardians interfered. They reprimanded the Indian sharply for attempting to rob them of the joy of torturing the prisoner.

On the Scioto they entered a large village where Logan, the famous Negro chief, was installed. Logan, who spoke English fluently, went to Kenton and chatted with him.

"The young men are very mad with you," said Logan.

"Don't despair," said Logan. "They plan to burn you at Sandusky, but I'll send two runners ahead and speak good for you."

ments were made to burn him the morning following his arrival there. He was at the stake and the end seemed near when a British Indian, named Drewyer interposed. He was eager to get information for Col. Hamilton, the commandant at Detroit. He begged for Kenton to be delivered over to him for a time. Later he would be returned and then he could be burned.

Although Drewyer made this promise, he had no intention of carrying it out. Drewyer took him to Detroit, but Kenton had little information that was of value to the British. He battered his shoulder and arm mended rapidly and his health, which had been shattered by his wounds and his gantlet experience, began to improve. Once he was well again he began to plan to escape.

With two young Kentuckians he managed to get away. They had obtained muskets and ammunition, but they had to traverse more than 200 miles of hostile country before they were safe. This they accomplished.

Once back in Kentucky Kenton promptly volunteered for the George Rogers Clark expedition. In the capture of Kaskaskia and Cahokia and the crowning success of that memorable campaign, the capture of Vincennes, he had a part, as he had in various other affairs of the frontier later in the revolutionary war.

In the Indian war that followed the revolution he was in service again. He was with St. Clair when that general went to defeat and he was with Mad Anthony Wayne when that general crushed the Indians at the battle of

Fallen Timbers. And again in the war of 1812 he was on the warpath.

Into the life of Simon Kenton a lot of strife was crowded and some bitterness. Probably the horrors of those three experiences at the stake and those eight runnings of the gantlet were not so bad as were his terrors when he thought he was a murderer—when he thought the blood of Lettichmann was on his hands. Terror, not crime, drove him to the wilderness, for the lad by thought he killed only was stunned.

But it was many years before Kenton knew the truth.

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